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SUBJECT: WORLD'S TALLEST PAGODA IN CHANGZHOU

REF: SHANGHAI 61

¶1. (U) With great pageantry, Tianning Temple opened its newly refurbished pagoda in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province, at the auspicious time of 9:08 AM on April 30. The pagoda is reported to be the tallest pagoda in the world and stands at 153.79 meters (505 feet). According to press reports, the temple was built over 1,000 years ago during the Tang Dynasty and has been rebuilt at least five times. Press reports vary as to how much was spent on the refurbishment with BBC and Xinhua reporting that the temple spent RMB 300 million (USD 39 million) and South China Morning Post (SCMP) reporting that refurbishments cost RMB 100 million (USD 13 million). The source of funding was through the temple and "its believers"; according to Changzhou Foreign Affairs Office (FAO) Director Shen Yilin, no government funds were used.

¶2. (U) There was a strong Changzhou Government presence at the temple opening with Changzhou Mayor Wang Weicheng attending and delivering remarks. After reaffirming the importance of Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" theory and President Hu Jintao's "Harmonious Society" concept, Mayor Wang said that China's reform and opening had led to an increase in living standards and faster economic development. He added that if the economy developed well, religion would also develop well.

¶3. (U) SCMP reported that more than 8,000 people attended the ceremony in Changzhou, a city of about 4 million located along the Yangtze River northwest of Shanghai in southern Jiangsu Province (ref). On the margins of the ceremony, Changzhou FAO Director Shen told Poloff that 108 high-level Buddhists from throughout Mainland China, as well as Taiwan, Macau, Hong Kong and Los Angeles also attended the ceremony. Reporters from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Singapore covered the event.

¶4. (U) The elaborate ceremony featured nine dragon-dance troupes, traditional Buddhist horns and other musical instruments, chanting, and speeches from government officials and distinguished Buddhist masters. At the conclusion of the speeches, thousands of balloons and a flock of doves were released.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: While many press reports said the temple opening was evidence of a religious revival in China, we believe it reflects both increased "space" for officially-sanctioned

religious groups and increased prosperity in East China. It may also reflect political savvy by Changzhou authorities who are now highlighting the temple as a tourist attraction. We would also hazard a guess that some of the "believers" funding the pagoda were members of the overseas Buddhist community. Since the introduction of the high-speed trains between Nanjing and Shanghai, Changzhou is now only an hour away from Shanghai, making it a potential sightseeing destination for those interested in daytrips from Shanghai. The temple is featured prominently in Changzhou's tourist pamphlets. Many of those attending the ceremony received gift bags that included Buddhist beads, a book on the temple and a Changzhou tourism guide.

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